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Foreword: Ethics in Journalism

By E. J. MEHREN

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The teachers of the people must be actuated by high principles; otherwise society will suffer. Newspapers, magazines and business papers form a continuation school which affects throughout life the graduates of every other educational institution, be it common school or university. As is the press, so will be society.

Observance by journalists, then, of the highest ethical standards is an imperative social necessity. There have always been sound rules of journalistic conduct, unformulated, seldom written, that have guided the best of our newspapers and magazines. The wide confidence which these journals enjoy is evidence of the extent to which they have lived up to high principles. On the other hand, there have been serious lapses.

It is with the purpose of cleaning up the sore spots, of raising the good to the level of the best, that we find in different parts of the country efforts to formulate the journalistic conscience into codes. Some of these efforts are set forth in the articles by Dean Allen, Mr. Norris and Mr. Hill.

Primarily, a code is a means of internal professional discipline for each group. We must be our own judges. We must shame the violators and help reform habitually offending papers.

But a code has a secondary value. It enables a profession to justify itself to the

public. House-cleaning cannot go on without some evidence of it coming to public knowledge. Then will ensue confidence; esteem will replace the distrust that may now exist.

Codes alone—mere expressions of sound standards of practice—will do some good, but to be of full value they must be accompanied by machinery for their enforcement and punishment for their violation. The medical profession enforces its codes through the county medical societies; the legal profession, through the state bar associations. There is need in the journalistic world of an organization or organizations through which the social responsibility of journalists can find expression. Here and there are state associations of newspaper men and local clubs. The business paper editors have their organizations. Is the time not ripe for an Institute of Journalists which will carry the banner of high purpose for the whole profession and stimulate the organization of functioning subsidiary or affiliated bodies in every part of the country?

With the heavy responsibility resting on journalists, a responsibility of supplying mental food and guidance to millions, a responsibility of teaching the entire people, can journalists afford to do less than bind the whole craft together for the erection and maintenance of high standards?